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Music Journalism

What's the point?

MARK APABLAZA

BY SUE CUMMINGS

IT IS THE THURSDAY BEFORE MEMORIAL DAY, and Peter Collins, one of the organizers of Music Journalism Awards and Conference, is moderating an ethics panel. The question posed to us on this morning at the Wyndham Bel Age Hotel is, "If the band you hate wants to fly you to the Bahamas for an interview, are you insulted? Flattered? Out the door?" It's an attempt to provoke debate, and it has unfortunately failed.

The question of whether a record label should pick up a writer's travel is a little too cut-and-dried for this saintly panel: myself, Keith Moerer of *Request*, Mark Kemp of *Option* and Scott Aiges of the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. Following what is really standard journalistic policy, we all reject that kind of influence from our subjects, but for the sake of argument we're wondering why nobody from the papers that *do* take junkets — *CMJ* and *Spin*, to name a couple — is here to defend the practice. And we're wondering why James Bernard, former editor of *The Source* who resigned last year when he refused to soften a negative piece, is not here at all, although he's listed in the program.

Many of my colleagues were skeptical about this conference and chose not to attend, but I was glad for the opportunity to discuss everyday rock-critic problems such as genre specialism, trivia, and the place of fanzines and on-line media. Whenever you gather writers together and point them constructively at the topic of their craft, some progress is inevitable. Though flawed, the Music Journalism Awards and Conference was important simply because it happened. People doing every other kind of writing, from investigative reporting to poetry, organize forums to promote professional standards. Since the birth of music journalism more than two centuries ago, we've avoided this much organized soul-searching. The reasons may say something about our distrust of authority, a sentiment that goes right along with loving rock & roll.

We rock critics mythologize ourselves as record-collecting nerds practicing an esoteric ritual. Among musicians we are typically considered to be frustrated, embittered would-be rock stars. To baby boomers on both sides of the computer, we are like the pair of bell-bottom jeans they wore to Woodstock: an anachronism, no longer useful, several sizes too small. (Historically, they gave music journalism its biggest push, then abandoned it in droves.) To publishers, we are at worst a way to placate advertisers, at best a snare for the youth market. To the editors of general-interest papers, we are considered the juvenile delinquents of the staff. But in reality, we are none of the above.

Although music is a specialized beat, we are journalists, basically like any other. We seek the work because we're idealistic and curious; we have an appetite for knowledge and communication. An investigative reporter builds fact upon fact until the narrative thread of events yields itself up to the reader. A music journalist, however, cannot avoid providing interpretation, because music, as with theater, painting or any of the arts, deals in representative symbols; the artist's job is to engage us in a dream. We are advocates for the audience. We exist to listen without wavering, and then record the experience. That is not to say we cannot write about other things. In the context of a record review, we can and do write about the whole world, because it is all contained in the best music. Sometimes we make more sense than anyone trying to explain Bosnia.

MUSIC

AS A PROFESSION, MUSIC JOURNALISM MAY HAVE had to wait longer for its own conference than anything except prostitution. The practice of reviewing concerts can be traced back to *The Spectator*, a London weekly newspaper in the mid-18th century, which ran a series of short reports on local performances in a column with the byline "Addison and Steele." They criticized the artificiality of London opera of the time, its passion for cultivating prima donnas at the expense of a music sense.

In the United States, vaudeville reviews appeared in the earliest editions of *Billboard*, which started publishing in 1894. *The Jazz Revolution* by Kathy J. Ogren cites reviews of popular music appearing in the black press of Chicago in the '20s. Olin Downes was writing criticism of ragtime in *Musical Quarterly* as early as 1918. By drawing on their experience as jazz listeners, Beat writers of the '50s established a relationship between subculture and music writing that continues today. Music journalism as we now know it basically started with the founding of *Rolling Stone* in 1967 and the magazine's support of New Journalists such as Thomas Wolfe. Around the same time, Dianne Fisher began editing the Riffs column in *The Village Voice*, and it became increasingly common for major daily newspapers across the country to have full-time pop critics.

The most distinguished critics who've stuck it out since that time — Greil Marcus, Peter Guralnick, Ellen Willis, Richard Meltzer and Robert Christgau, among others — represent a wealth of experience to younger writers. One of the disappointments of the Music Journalism Awards and Conference was that its panel entitled "The Roots of Rock Criticism: First Generation Rockcrits Look Back" featured none of them.

I think of my own formal training in short-story writing — endless study of the masters, months spent refining a single manuscript, the brutal test of reading work publicly, the exacting face-to-face critiques of my teachers and peers. Music journalism is treated as a sideline if it gets included at all in conventional journalism-school curriculums. At a conference for the working music journalist, we could benefit as much from workshops built on the academic model as from the panel-'n'-showcase format typical in the music industry. I'd like to see a grant fund to sponsor important books. I'd like to see real workshops, where people exchange manuscripts in advance and even present works in progress for critique. I'd like to see a written standards code, a sort of Hippocratic Oath for music journalists.

There is no question our work could be better than it is. Apathy among readers and writers, anti-intellectualism, lack of vision and support from publishers all plague the profession. Alienation among the baby boomers, the first generation to practice rock criticism as we know it, means that an ethic of mentorship is sorely lacking. Instead of older, more experienced writers passing their wisdom down to younger ones, we too often inherit their cynicism for a trade they feel they've outgrown. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why New Journalism has failed to fulfill the promise it offered in the '60s. Writing in the first person and employing the techniques of fiction — stylistic devices that defined New Journalism — can be powerful tools when applied with the skill of people like Marcus and Guralnick. But in the hands of those less skilled, they can result in painfully bad prose.

As long as our potential continues to be underestimated — by editors, by publishers, by ourselves — we'll remain choked by mediocrity and vulnerable to the music industry's interest in selling recordings. It's not a matter of just saying no to junkets. Staffed as it is by many true-blue fans, the industry is at times a better friend to critics than the publishers who sign their checks. Consider the case of Nashville's *The Tennessean*, one of the two major dailies in Music City, USA, which didn't hire a full-time replacement for the retiring Robert K. Oermann until industry executives shamed the paper into doing so.

Our professional standards will never evolve in the course of a two-hour panel at CMJ or South by Southwest, the national music-business conventions most often attended by writers. We blow into those press panels and spend a couple of hours careening from the topics of geezer gridlock to Courtney Love to howdolgetyoutowriteaboutmyband, then we blow out and on to a week of parties, showcases, and filing some story that's going to justify our travel expenses to the boss. At none of these conventions do we do what we regularly expect of our readers: to sit down, en masse, and survey the best and worst of our writing, and then read the best pieces all the way through.

What's the point? Ask anyone you see out there waiting for the bus with a copy of *Rolling Stone*. LA

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